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AUTHOR Godbold, Laura H.
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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of children face deteriorating family bonds, out-of-wedlock births, lack of shelter, pregnancy, abortion, and drug or alcohol related crimes. When schools fail to address the immediate family and social needs of students, learning for these students becomes difficult and relatively unimportant. This study promotes the importance and usefulness of middle school guidance counselors in addressing these social problems. Six middle school counselors were interviewed using a semi-structured format and then the varying student/counselor ratios and the demographics of each counselor's school were incorporated into the responses. Results indicate that the amount of paperwork involved in testing and registration procedures and the high student to counselor ratios left counselors under significant time constraints. These demands prevented counselors from meeting the personal needs of all their students. Understaffed guidance departments should be supplied with paraprofessionals who would handle the testing procedures and reduce the counselor's amount of paperwork. The paper also lists interviewees' advice and suggestions for their colleagues. (RJM)

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Middle School Guidance Counselors:

Are There Enough?

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ABSTRACT

Deteriorating family bonds, out-of-wedlock births, homeless youth, teenage pregnancies, teenage abortions, drug/alcohol related crimes... These issues are a reality in an increasing number of children's lives. Without first addressing the immediate family and social needs of our students, actual learning is difficult and seen as comparatively unimportant. This study was performed for two purposes. The first and most significant reason was to promote the importance and usefulness of middle school guidance counselors. Much emphasis was placed on the need for increased funding from the Department of Education. Secondly, the study was designed to provide helpful advice and suggestions to middle school guidance counselors from their colleagues. This qualitative study was performed by interviewing middle school guidance counselors from varying demographic areas in Albemarle County and the City of Charlottesville. The interviews were structured in an open-ended format but were primarily focused on the interviewees' specific counseling programs. Results clearly indicated that due to time constraints and the amount of paraprofessional work required, it is not possible for a middle school guidance counselor to meet the real and personal needs of all their students. This study concludes that the most practical solution would be to supply paraprofessional help to the understaffed guidance department.

INTRODUCTION

The services that middle school counselors perform are taking on a much more important role in the functionality of a school system. With effective school counseling programs, teachers, administrators, and counselors can cooperatively work as a team. Together, the three professional groups can provide greater assistance to the increasing needs of middle school students. Without an adequate school guidance program, the "team" would be lacking an essential member. Both teachers and administrators admittedly rely on the counseling services present within the school system.

Although the demand for school guidance programs is clearly understood by the teachers and administrators at the individual school level, its importance is not recognized by the state Department of Education. Not only is this detrimental to existing programs, it also eliminates the possibility of strengthening middle school counseling programs by adding supplementary assistance. Since state officials do not spend regular time in the middle school setting, they obviously cannot see firsthand the effectiveness of middle school counseling programs. Therefore, to understand the usefulness of school counseling programs, state officials need tangible supporting data proving the need for strong

school counseling programs.

This situation creates a Catch 22 for middle school counselors. As it stands now, middle school counselors simply do not have the time to perform all of their existing job requirements. They have to prioritize their time effectively, devoting time to the most important issues first. Taking the additional time to document every individual or group counseling session, every parental contact, and every phone call is a burdensome request. Not only does it take away from the counselors' valuable time with students, it also is degrading to the counseling profession. On the other hand, without paperwork documenting the effectiveness of middle school guidance counseling, state officials are left unaware of its vitality to our school system.

Our rapidly changing society is causing today's children to be faced with much more serious problems than children encountered in previous generations. The number of single parent families is rapidly increasing. The divorce rate, homeless youth, out-of-wedlock births, teenage pregnancies, teenage abortions, drug/alcohol abuse, and crime are all on the rise. Furthermore, our children are having to face these critical issues at an even younger age. Problems that previously occurred primarily at the high school level are now affecting the lives of middle school students.

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First of all, the study shows the incredible need and importance of middle school counselors, emphasizing the necessity for increased funding from the state's department of education. This study supports the most beneficial use of additional funding would be in providing supplemental help in schools' guidance department. Secondly, this study provides helpful advice and suggestions to middle school guidance counselors from their colleagues. The ideas that fellow counselors find either successful or unsuccessful prove extremely valuable and could aid in the development of their specific counseling programs. This is especially true given the minimal amount of literature and research on middle school counseling. Together, the two should fulfill our underlying goal of serving our middle school students with the counseling services they require.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Problems of Modern Adolescents

"Crime is up, educational performance is down. Drug use is up, the number of two-parent families is down" (Whitmire, 1994, p. B1). Seventy percent of juveniles in long-term detention centers grew up without fathers in the home (U.S. Department of Heath and Human Services, 1993). Factors such as the divorce rate, out-of-wedlock births, homeless youth, teenage pregnancies, teenage abortions, and the use of drugs and alcohol are all on an upward swing and potentially affecting our middle school children.

Family bonds are deteriorating leaving our children with extreme instability. In the past thirty years, the number of out of wedlock births among whites has increased from 2% to 22% and among blacks, the number has increased from 23% to 68% (Whitmire, 1994). In cities such as Detroit, out-of-wedlock births account for 71% of all births (Whitmire, 1994). Nationwide, the percentage of out-of-wedlock births will soon surpass the percentage of marriages that end in divorce, which is already slightly more than 50% (Zimiles and Lee, 1991). In addition, families with children represent the fastest growing group of homeless persons in the 1990's, contributing to the 500,000 youth presently homeless in the

United States. When comparing the statistics of today to those of the 1920's, the results are staggering. "In the 1920's, eighty percent of the children in Harlem lived in two-parent families, despite the poverty and racism of the time" (Whitmire, 1994, B1). Without a family environment, morals and the distinction between right and wrong can no longer be taught in the home.

An additional problem is teenage pregnancy. The number of pregnancies among teens is increasing each year with approximately forty percent ending in abortion. This is a disheartening statistic considering that there are at least one million teenage pregnancies estimated for next year alone (Fernandez, 1993). Approximately 12,000 to 13, 000 of these pregnancies are attributed to children under the age of fifteen (Information Access Company, 1993). Due to this increase in sexual activity among teens, a recent explosion in sexually transmitted diseases has followed. Over three million teenagers became infected with sexually transmitted diseases last year. "The risk of infection is greater than the risk of pregnancy for teens" (Information Access Company, 1993).

Drug and alcohol usage presents an even greater concern among teenagers. Twenty-six percent of all fourth graders and forty-two percent of all sixth graders have at least experimented with alcohol (Zimiles and Lee, 1991). Furthermore, in 1993, federal officials reported

an increase in marijuana and LSD usage among teenagers citing that one out of every six 13 year olds has tried marijuana (Murphy, 1994). Considering that marijuana is the drug which commonly leads to that usage of more powerful and addictive drugs, this is an extremely discouraging statistic. Since 80% of all crimes in the United States are drug related, the necessity of addressing this issue at an early adolescent stage of development appears obvious (Zimiles and Lee, 1991).

To illustrate the difference in the number and seriousness of problems that our middle school children are facing today, a teacher survey from the 1940s was compared to the identical teacher survey given in the 1990's. The teacher survey, fifty years ago, was given to recognize teacher complaints regarding student behavior. The top two complaints were found to be chewing gum and speaking out of turn. The most recent teacher survey produced extremely different results. The top three complaints about student behavior were violence, drugs, and weapons permeating the school (Fernandez, 1993). The change in concerns is incredibly dramatic and cannot be ignored. These issues are a reality in these children's lives, therefore, "schools cannot just concentrate on the 'three R's' (reading, writing, and arithmetic) any longer" (Fernandez, 1993).

These alarming statistics highlight the additional societal problems

that compound the unavoidable pressures of human development. Physical, social, and emotional characteristics are rapidly changing during these adolescent years. Physical characteristics are more varied between fifth and eighth grade than during any other age bracket (Cambell, 1992). This results in both awkwardness and a new concern about appearance (Cambell, 1992). Socially, children become more aware of ethnic/racial backgrounds and the impact of peer pressure assumes a much stronger role. The need to belong is especially crucial during this period of life and in most instances, "the former intimate sharing relationship between parents and children either diminishes or disappears" (Cambell, 1992, p. 10). The emotional characteristics of middle school children can be best described as fragile. At this age, children are unable to put things in perspective, for small misfortunes can "ruin [a student's] entire life" for several days (Cambell, 1992, p.11). Additional problems center around self-concept and sex-role identification.

As teachers, our goal is to supply the most effective educational and learning environment for all students. However, since "school performance and learning is affected by lack of functional harmony among various aspects of life", the students' unmet needs must be addressed first. These domains are described by the acronym BASIC ID which represents Behavior, Affect (or emotion), Sensation (or sensory

awareness), Imagery (of the self or others), Cognition (or thinking), Interpersonal relations, and Diet (or drugs, physiology, health) (St. Clair, 1989, p. 220). Ideally, these BASIC ID needs of the students should be accommodated by the school's comprehensive counseling program. Abraham Maslow, psychologist, reports that "people are not likely to be motivated to pursue intellectual challenges or develop a sense of positive self-esteem until the more basic or 'lower level' needs in his or her hierarchy have been regularly satisfied" (Daniels, 1992, p. 105). These needs would be more successfully addressed at the middle school level, before they escalate into more serious problems.

The Need for Counselors

These issues highlight the need for effective and available counselors at the middle school level. However, many of the nation's middle schools do little to accommodate the many stresses of today's middle school students. "The nation's middle schools have long been treated as middle children often are, overlooked while attention is directed to the need of their older counterparts, the high schools, and their younger ones, the elementary grades" (Celis, 1992, p. B8). It is time schools take note of this age group, where so many educational problems begin and adolescent problems "flare up" (Celis, 1992). "Middle school

may well be the educational level with the most critical need for guidance and counseling services" (Cambell, 1992, p. 12).

School staff members, including teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors, perform their jobs most effectively when they know and serve the whole child. The philosophy that education should focus on the whole child should especially be at the heart of all school guidance programs (Harrison, 1991). The underlying goal for counseling programs should be to "foster students' educational progress" whether it deals with improving school attitudes and behaviors, peer relationships, study skills, death of a family member, divorce, substance abuse, family abuse, or sexuality concerns (Borders and Drury, 1992, p. 491). To genuinely help these children, the school counselor needs to "go below the surface" of the student and look into the deeper aspects of the child's life (Hollohan, 1990, p. 245). An adult closely monitoring a student's successes and setbacks can be extremely beneficial to a student, especially one coming from a dysfunctional home environment (Cambell, 1992).

Borders and Drury (1992) say that an effective school counseling program is vital to the success of a school's learning environment with its main purpose being to "permeate the school environment and foster an atmosphere of openness, sensitivity, and responsiveness within the school community", a school counseling program greatly contributes to the

overall educational climate. Increased student achievement and self-esteem is clearly linked to this atmosphere (Borders and Drury, 1992, p. 491). Thus, a school's counseling program "is both an integral part of and an independent component of the total educational program" (Borders and Drury, 1992, p. 488). Although the program has its own distinct curriculum, its underlying purpose is to facilitate the instructional process that leads to students' academic success (Myrick, 1987).

School counseling is "central rather than peripheral to teaching and learning in the schools" and has proven to be influential to academic achievement among middle school students (Borders and Drury, 1992, p. 487). Results from a number of studies indicate that students who received counseling have improved not only their academic performance, but also their attitude, classroom behavior, self-esteem and school attendance. For example, a study called Succeeding in School was performed in 18 different schools on sixth graders in North Carolina. Conclusions of the study indicated significant differences in the counseled group in classroom behavior, attitudes toward school, and achievement in language arts and mathematics as compared to the control group (Borders and Drury, 1992). In addition, a variety of studies were done in Florida and Indiana on a group of fifth graders. Both students and teachers reported significant positive changes in classroom behavior and

attitudes for both target students (those with negative attitudes), and top students (those with positive attitudes) (Borders and Drury, 1992). Therefore, counseling programs undoubtedly have a positive impact on the school environment.

Problems with Providing Effective Counseling Programs

Proving that school counseling programs are a necessary component in the school system, especially middle schools, is not as simple as it may appear. Several obstacles hinder the flow of additional government funding which restricts the possibility of additional school guidance counselors. The most severe of these roadblocks includes counselors' ambiguous job descriptions, the inconsistent hiring and evaluation criteria, and the lack of sufficient research on the effectiveness of school counseling. These deficiencies unfortunately leave teachers, administrators, and school board members viewing school counseling as an auxiliary service rather than a necessity. With this dominating perception, the area of school counseling is among the first to receive reductions in government and district funding. Therefore, school districts are left with a minimal number of counselors for an increasing number of students and problems.

The Role of Middle School Guidance Counselors

In the past, there has been confusion about the role and functions of school counselors. The lack of "standardization of counseling across schools, school districts, or states" compounds the uncertain job descriptions of school counselors (Harrison, 1991, p. 69). As a result, teachers and administrators commonly assign nonguidance and counseling activities to the school counselor (Borders and Drury, 1992). These superficial duties should only be a "backdrop to the in-depth work of true counseling" (Hollohan, 1990, p. 245). However, it is reported from a study completed in St. Joseph, MO, that 44% of middle school guidance counselor's time is spent on support services such as lunchroom and clerical duties. Only half of their time is spent on counseling related jobs such as advisement, registration, and support activities (Hargens, 1987). Time-consuming clerical tasks can be appropriately completed by a paraprofessional rather than by counselors. This would enable school counselors to spend their time and energy on more appropriate activities/services for which they have special training (Borders and Drury, 1992). Consequently, the counselor's availability, effectiveness, and accountability would be increased, thereby displaying the positive impact of counselor related duties.

Without set job descriptions, school counselors are left to define

their own goals and objectives leaving no standard or consistent criteria by which to evaluate, improve, or expand counseling services (Harrison, 1991). Since guidance counselors are being evaluated by administrators who are untrained in the area of counseling and have no additional training in counseling supervision skills, the counseling profession should provide administrators with clearly defined objectives, responsibilities, and a system by which they can evaluate school counselors (Borders and Drury, 1992). In turn, this will not only help administrators justify requests for increased funding, but will also help change the attitude of school principals concerning the need for supplemental middle school counselors (Harrison, 1991).

Research in Effectiveness

Research studies revealing the effectiveness and need for middle school guidance counseling would increase administrators and school board officials' awareness and support for school counseling. However, "published research on the effects of middle school counseling comprises a small portion of all counseling research" (St. Clair, 1989, p. 223). Compared to the research conducted at the high school and elementary school level, the extent of research is extremely limited. The amount of research is even smaller when considering articles authored or coauthored

by school counselors. Less than ten reports were found in a literature search performed over the last decade (St. Clair, 1989). Due to the lack of research on the effectiveness of middle school counseling, the need for counselors has not been validated. There is simply no evidence to support such programs. Furthermore, with no reports about existing school counseling programs, it is impossible to meet the changing needs of the students, much less demand additional school counselors (St. Clair, 1989). In order to increase the number of students reached within the middle school, successful programs, techniques, and strategies need to be researched and reported. Presently, the "counseling domains are underresearched, and the integration and interrelatedness of the domains for middle school counseling is unexplored" (St. Clair, 1989, p. 226).

Basically, there exists an incredibly large number of children who need help. These children need "an adult with whom identifies with them, encourages group cohesiveness, provides opportunities for sharing feelings, and improves student/teacher relationships" (Cambell, 1992, p. 11). The problem is that the number of students in quest for counseling assistance far outweighs the number of students school guidance counselors can possibly reach. The increasing number of students per counselor reduces counselor availability and, therefore, effectiveness. This causes the benefits of school counseling to go unseen, making it

impossible to request funding for additional school counselors.

METHODOLOGY

In order to attest the usefulness of middle school guidance counselors, a qualitative study was used. Six middle school guidance counselors from varying demographic areas in Albemarle County and the City of Charlottesville were interviewed. The counselors interviewed represented a cross-sample of counselors based on gender, race, and age. All of the participants were enthusiastic about the study and its underlying goal of documenting middle school counseling's importance and effectiveness. The middle school counselors were extremely willing to share their knowledge and insights concerning their profession.

The interviews were semi-structured and consisted primarily of three open-ended questions. Listed below are the interview questions used throughout this study.

1. What are some successful techniques or counseling strategies that you use in your counseling program?
2. Are there any strategies that you have found to be unsuccessful or would recommend avoiding?
3. If possible, what would you change about your job description or job requirements of a school guidance counselor?

These broad questions set a relaxed, open, and honest tone for the

interviews. Each interview lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes and was conducted in the guidance counselor's office. With the permission of the counselor, the interviews were recorded on tape for further analysis.

The data collected was primarily based on interviews with six different counselors and incorporated the varying student/counselor ratios and the demographics of each particular school. This study was designed to first analyze each interview in a case analysis format. After focusing on the specifics of the individual case studies, a cross-interview analysis was performed. An interview guide approach was used in the cross-interview analysis grouping relevant data by topics. Finally, the conclusions derived from the cross-interview analysis are discussed in greater detail. The paper finishes with a detailed discussion of the conclusions derived from the cross-interview analysis.

ANALYSIS

In analyzing the data collected from the six interview sessions, several patterns and reoccurring techniques were found as well as many unique program characteristics. Since it is important to notice both the similarities and the differences found in the sample group of counselors, a case analysis has been completed on each school's guidance counseling program prior to performing a cross-case analysis. Each case analysis will include a brief description of the guidance counselor, the particular school's demographics, and some specifics concerning the nature of their counseling program.

Individual Case Analysis

The first two interviews were held at a middle school with a particularly high socioeconomic status. This school provides a counselor for each of the three grade levels. Therefore, each counselor is responsible for approximately 250 students, which is the lowest student to counselor ratio of all the middle schools used in this study. In addition, the school is comparatively well-staffed in that it has both a part-time assistant in the guidance department and a very active and supportive parent volunteer group. The middle school has only 5% minority students

and an equally small percentage of students who receive free lunch. The demographics of this middle school are extremely rare.

The two guidance counselors, one being a Caucasian female about 50 years old and the other being an African American male about 40 years old, have very few complaints concerning their school's guidance counseling program. Both are extremely satisfied with their work and believe their program "to be successful in meeting the needs of their student body". The school operates on a slide schedule which allows the counselors to arrange their group sessions at the same time every week without causing the students to miss the same subject. The students, teachers, and counselors find the daily schedule change to be beneficial for all involved.

The third and fourth interviews were held at an exceptionally rural middle school where some students travel an hour and a half on a school bus to and from school each day. The three grades combined have 550 students and only two counselors. The counselors remain with the same group of students throughout their entire middle school experience which is unique compared to other counseling programs included in this study. The counselors think that it is important to minimize the amount of change in the students' lives.

Based on the Literacy Passport Test, this middle school is

considered to have an extremely high at-risk population. (At-risk children are those which score considerably below the average in several areas on the Literacy Passport Test.) The racial mix is 11% minority of which at least 10.5% is African American. Thirty percent of the students receive free lunch and one-fifth of the students receive special education services. Having no additional part-time help in the guidance department and very minimal assistance from parents, the two counselors "cannot possibly provide counseling services to the number of students who need it".

Although the two guidance counselors in this middle school have their own style of counseling, they have both developed a sense of trust and confidentiality with the students. The counselor who oversees the seventh graders and half of the sixth graders is an African American female. She not only addresses the counseling needs of 275 students, but also teaches a core curriculum math course to a group of students who have previously had disciplinary problems within the regular classroom. She describes this undertaking to be "necessary, yet incredibly time consuming". The other counselor, responsible for the eighth grade and the remaining half of the sixth grade, is also under significant time pressures. This counselor is a young, energetic, Caucasian male. He believes in having a sense of humor with the students and relates to them most

effectively in an informal setting of their choice, whether it be playing basketball, taking a walk, or talking over lunch. He finds his subtle methods of addressing the counseling needs of the students to be successful.

The fifth interview was conducted at a fairly urban middle school. The ratio of counselors to students is slightly better than the preceding school, but still, there are only two counselors providing services for 483 students. Considering the minimal amount of parental support found within the school and the lack of any part-time assistance in the guidance department, the 241:1 ratio is worse than it may appear. The inner-city location of this county school accounts for the large racial mix of students, 24% considered minority. These particular demographics are quite rare for a county school.

The guidance counselor interviewed is a Caucasian male in his late thirties who approaches his work in a professional and methodical manner. He holds two graduate degrees in the area of counseling and feels very qualified to perform counseling services to the middle school students. The incredible amount of paperwork and added responsibilities he is required to do is frustrating to him and monopolizes at least 50-60% of his time. He expressed himself by saying, "It does not make managerial sense to require a person with graduate degrees in counseling to perform

work that could be taken over by a paraprofessional". All six counselors expressed the same opinion.

The sixth and final middle school guidance program included in the study has an exceedingly high percentage of minority students because of its urban location. Nearly all of the children living in public housing or homeless shelters in the city attend this particular middle school. Forty percent of the students are minorities and between forty and fifty percent of the students participate in the free lunch program. With these demographics, one would assume that the increased demand for counseling services would lead to additional professional counselors in the school guidance department. However, this school has the highest student to counselor ratio of all of the middle schools included in this study.

The two counselors find the amount of work required of them to be overwhelming. Being responsible for 340 students is nearly impossible especially when such a large number of them are in desperate need of the guidance counselor's help. In this type of situation, the two counselors feel as though they run out of time before they are able to do the things that they need to do, much less the things that they want to do. Finding it impossible to deliver services to all of the students, the two guidance counselors end up choosing their battles and trying to at least do the super important things.

The eighth grade counselor interviewed has been a school guidance counselor for 18 years. The initial ten years of the Caucasian woman's career was spent at the high school level. This provides an interesting and direct correlation concerning the different services high school guidance counselors and middle school counselors provide. She reports that "middle school is the most crucial time to reach 'at-risk' children. At this age, kids are very workable and as a counselor, I feel as though I can make more of an impact on their lives. They become much more restrictive at the high school level". Being at both the high school level and the middle school level, she believes that her actual professional counseling skills are used to a much greater degree at the middle school level.

Cross-case Analysis

Using a cross-case analysis, several commonalities were found in regard to each of the three open-ended interview questions. The most beneficial aspect to the counseling profession is the concept of a team atmosphere. Much success is found in all of the middle school counseling programs used in this study due to the cooperation between the teachers, counselors, administrators, and in a few instances, the parents. Guidance counselors are "involved to a great extent with the teachers" and serve as

a "resource for the teachers". The team approach works most effectively when administrators, teachers, parents, and fellow counselors perceive counseling as an important aspect in the school's functionality. In addition, to maximize the success factor, it is important to let all members of the team understand the role of middle school counselors and benefits counseling programs offer.

As a whole, the middle school counselors interviewed believe that although individual counseling is needed in some instances, they can access the most students through group and classroom counseling. Since their time is limited, their goal is to reach the greatest number of students possible. All of the middle school guidance programs offer similar group topics; however, they have varying methods of forming the groups. In half of the middle schools studied, every student is given a survey about what type of group they would like to be involved with at the beginning of each year. Other ways of developing groups are through teacher recommendations, groups continued from elementary school, self-referrals, and counselor/parent/or administrator referrals. Each counselor interviewed thinks that his/her system of coordinating groups is effective.

Again focusing on the limited time that middle school guidance counselors have, one counseling strategy that all of the guidance

counselors who participated in this study recommend is to avoid any type of therapy. For both time and ethical reasons, indepth therapy is simply a task completely out of a school guidance counselor's hands. Another counselor comments that "we are not therapists. We are trained in general and academic counseling". Although the interviewed counselors do not see it as their job to perform therapeutic tasks, they all recognize their responsibility to refer students who really need therapeutic assistance to agencies available in the community. The counselors believe that the educational setting is appropriate for intervention and short-term problem solving, but it is not the setting for therapy.

When the middle school counselors were asked what they would change about their job description, their answer was unanimous. All of the counselors interviewed felt as though they did not have the sufficient time needed to perform all of their job requirements in addition to meeting the needs of their students. Middle school counselors are required to handle all of the testing within the school which includes both the Literacy Passport Test and the ITBS Test. These procedures monopolize three months of the guidance counselors' time. An additional three to four months is devoted to registration, whether it be for the incoming sixth graders, students proceeding to the seventh or eighth grade, or for high school courses. Furthermore, guidance counselors are

required to participate in child studies, individual conferrencing, follow-up phone calls, parental conferences, and home visitations. All of these requirements are in addition to individual, group, and classroom counseling. These demands on the middle school counselor are overwhelming, especially considering that the state mandates only one counselor for every 500 students.

Suggestions and Recommendations

The interviewed middle school counselors have several suggestions to make better use of their limited time. One suggestion is to relieve counselors from the testing process. This type of work "restricts guidance counselors from their professional work". Another counselor states that "my two graduate degrees would be much more useful if I were able to provide more direct services to the students rather than the indirect services such record keeping and notes which could easily be performed by a paraprofessional". Two-thirds of the counselors recommend a full-time secretary solely for the guidance department. By eliminating some paraprofessional tasks, the middle school guidance counselors would be able to offer the students a better and more complete school counseling program.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Middle school students are at an extremely crucial stage of their development. In many cases, it is these malleable years which determine the future of our children. Once they pass though this stage of life and move onto their high school years, it becomes much more difficult to mold their already established values and belief systems. It is important for middle school students to enter high school with a clear vision of what lies ahead, giving them both a goal and the desire to move through school. It is of utmost importance for middle school guidance counselors to reach these students at such a susceptible stage of life.

The problem is, however, that middle school counselors cannot feasibly meet the needs of all of their students. Mostly due to the amount of paperwork involved in the testing and registration procedures and the high student to counselor ratios, middle school counselors are under significant time constraints. This causes them to prioritize their time concentrating only on the most crucial matters which leaves many students' needs unmet. Undoubtedly, the middle school counselors interviewed spend as much of their time as possible conferrencing with students individually, in groups, or within the classroom setting. However, in 80% of the cases, there is clearly not enough time available.

Being pressured for time, middle school counselors have to focus on the students with the most serious problems first. Therefore, the students dealing with comparatively minor dilemmas are left without aid from the school counselor. Understanding that the seriousness of problems is all relative to the individual, it is difficult to dismiss problems as only minor.

An initial solution to allow middle school counselors to spend more time with the students is to supply each middle school guidance department with paraprofessional help. The paraprofessional would handle the testing procedures for the middle school and reduce the amount of paperwork middle school counselors are required to complete. In addition, having extra help in the guidance department would enable the necessary amount of record keeping and documentation to occur. This increased amount of documentation concerning the counseling services provided at the middle school level will be beneficial to the counseling profession in the long run. It would serve as a strong argument to the state's department of education, hopefully decreasing the student to counselor ratios.

In trying to better meet the needs of our middle school students, further study should be performed on the allocation of money within the Department of Education. Although this study examines a number of

issues concerning middle school counseling, the following questions remain unanswered: 1. What percentage of education dollars is budgeted for middle school guidance counseling? 2. What type of proof does the Department of Education need in order to increase the allotted percentage of taxpayer's money to middle school guidance counseling programs? 3. How can the difference between the amount of taxpayers' dollars received in the county as opposed to the city be minimized providing equal educational services? Answering these questions would help middle school guidance counselors proceed in strengthening their programs.

A change in our country's mentality is needed. A larger percent of taxpayers money is spent on controlling problems after they occur rather than preventing them from happening in the first place. Taxpayers have the choice to pay for it by controlling the situation using preventative strategies, or in damage and harm done to the community (Johnson, 1993). It is cheaper to deal with these problems in the schools, primarily at the middle school level, as opposed to dealing with them later when people are incarcerated (Fernandez, 1993). Incarceration is not only a greater cost to the person, but also to society. Furthermore, since the existence of detention centers has not been proven to be a deterrent to crime, our money would be better spent in supplying addition school counseling services to our youth. Using preventative methods for crime would

decrease the demand for building more juvenile detention centers and, in the long run, increase their deterrent factor. In addition, it would create a safer and more productive society.

Our country needs to stop focusing solely on the consequences of children's problems and start addressing their problems before they escalate into serious, life threatening matters. By developing effective middle school counseling programs, preventative services would be readily available to children during their formative years. Consequently, the number of problems in the future would be considerably reduced. Although addressing children's increasing number of problems would be an added responsibility for the educational system, the rewards would be well worth the struggle. These social issues are a reality and can no longer be ignored in our schools.

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